RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Quarterly
Volume 52 No. 1 Spring 2022

RUTLAND FIRE DEPARTMENT MEMORIES

BY

RAYMOND M. MOONEY

About our author

I was born and brought up in Rutland, attending Immaculate Heart of Mary and Rutland High Schools and graduated from The University of Vermont with a Major in history and a minor in English. I joined the Rutland Fire Department as a substitute on May 21, 1966 and was appointed a regular on September 7, 1969. I retired as a Lieutenant on June 30, 2004. I now work part-time for the Aldous, Durfee and Barnard Funeral Homes. I have three daughters and five grandchildren and have been happily married to Judy Ladabouche for 52 years. Ben Burdge and I have done many Rutland-related videos for the Rutland Historical Society which are available on its website or on YouTube under "The Best Rutland Documentaries." My father was a police officer in Rutland for 27 years.

The Stories you are about to read are all true. The names have not been changed to protect the innocent! I have been asked by Barb Giffin to remember back to my days as a City of Rutland firefighter and come up with some old stories and tales for this Quarterly.

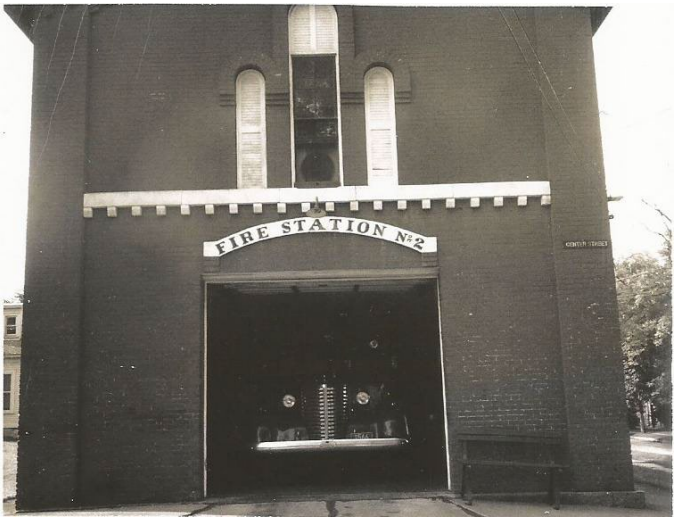
The history of the City of Rutland Fire Department and the Chief Alfred Koltonski era is covered in the Historical Society video "Fire. The History of the Rutland Fire Department and the Chief Koltonski Era" created by fellow Historical Society member, Ben Burdge, and myself. Ben also plays the role of "Nickwackett" the squirrel, the Rutland Historical Society mascot in parades.

First, it is nice to see old Station #2 getting some State of Vermont recognition with a historical site marker. Being the home of the Rutland Historical Society for the last thirty years, it is always nostalgic and heart-warming to be in there doing research and remembering the days of the phone ringing or gong sounding as Engine 2 roared out the door.

The original building was the home of the Nickwackett Hose Company, one of eight volunteer fire departments in the city until 1894 when a paid department was organized. There used to be a school upstairs and student entered from the read door. This was discontinued with the men had to use the upstairs for a dormitory.

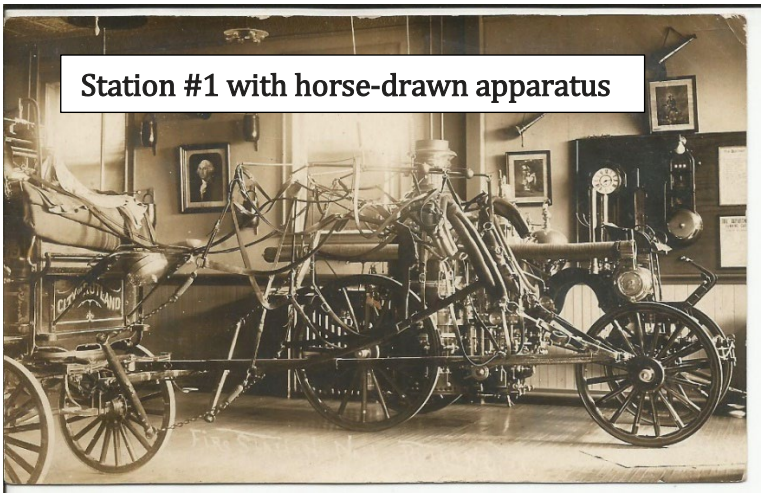
Originally, there were three men on duty in Station 2 until 1946 when it was reduced to two. Eventually, more men were added to reduce horrendous work hours and the two-platoon system started with twelve men on duty; ten men at Station 1, and two men at Station 2.

But enough of this rambling on about the department history. Let's get going with some hard-to-believe, but true stories.



Station #2 now the Rutland Historical Society.

Much has changed in Rutland fire fighting over the years. Motorized apparatus first replaced horses in 1915 and by 1927 all apparatus, which included three pumpers and a ladder truck were motorized.



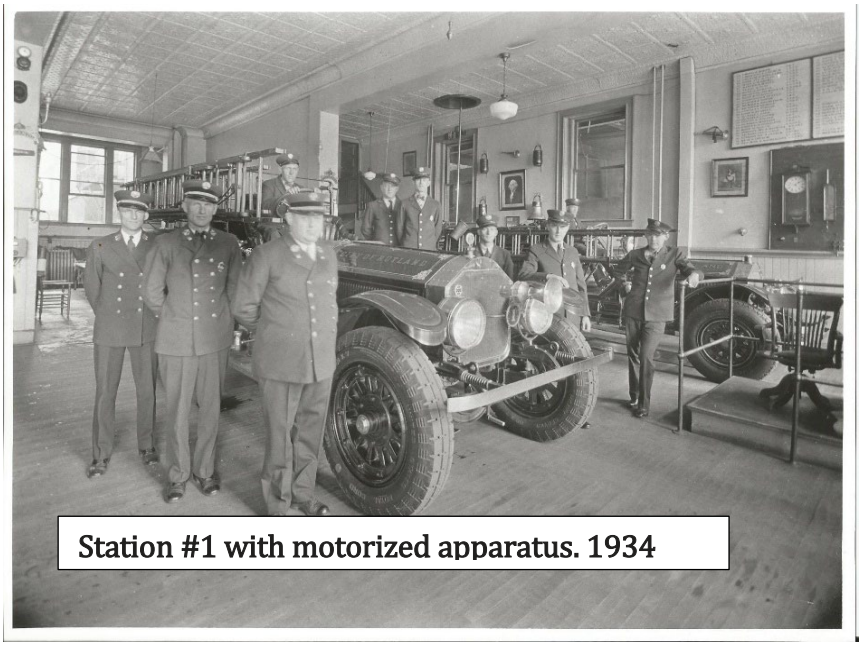
Station #1 with horse-drawn apparatus

A fireman's funeral. South Main Street hill. 1922

Motorized apparatus in front of Station #1 in 1926

In the old days, when help was needed at a fire, the officer or a fireman would pull the nearest fire box which automatically blew the whistle. This practice was stopped in 1946 when the two-platoon system started and six extra men we added to the ranks. By that time the police cars had radios with which they could call their station, which in turn would call the fire station by the "police phone." Picking it up on either end would cause it to ring and you had immediate voice contact. The police desk man would tell the "stay in man" at the fire station to manually set up the number of the nearest fire box to the fire on the transmitter which would blow the whistle. In 1953, we finally got radios for the trucks, but the police phone remained active as police officers discovered many fires over the years and radioed them into their station.

Station #1. 1927.

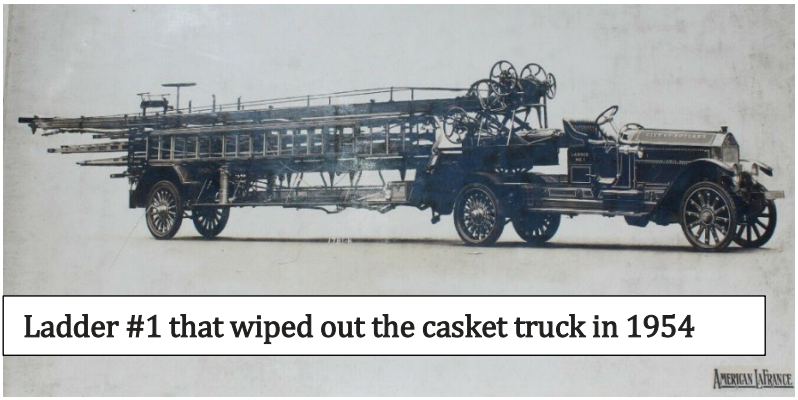


Station #1 with motorized apparatus. 1934

In those days, the men used soda and acid extinguishers with a forty-gallon soda, acid, and water tank on the truck with a booster line of hose. If that didn't quell the blaze, the truck then laid a line of hose from the nearest hydrant and stretched handiness. When I started the trucks carried 300 and 500 gallons of water. Today, some carry over a thousand gallons. Current department members carry pressurized water cans which can knock down small fires quickly and prevent their spread. Former Chief Shelly once told me that in New York City, this was common practice and the guy carrying it was called "The Can Man."

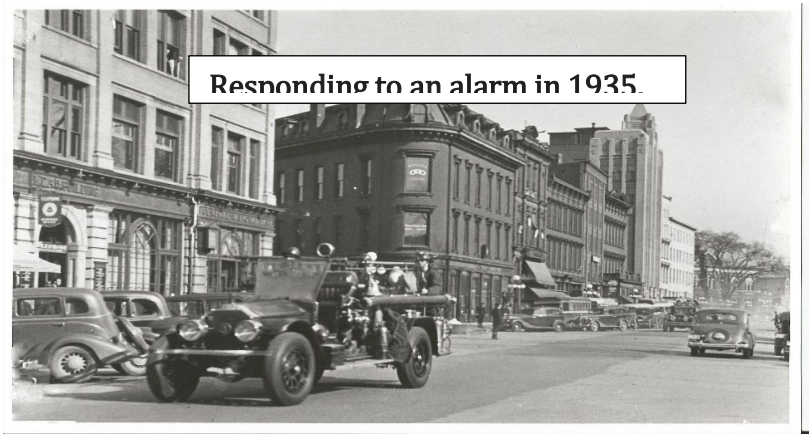
The old ladder truck was a 1927 75-foot American LaFrance tractor trailer truck with a tiller man steering from the rear.

In 1954 while turning onto West Street from Court Street, the tiller man, who steered in the opposite direction in order to make corners, over-corrected and struck the trailer of a truck carrying crated caskets! The ladder cleaned out about 6 caskets off the truck onto West Street and Dr. Pisanelli's lawn!

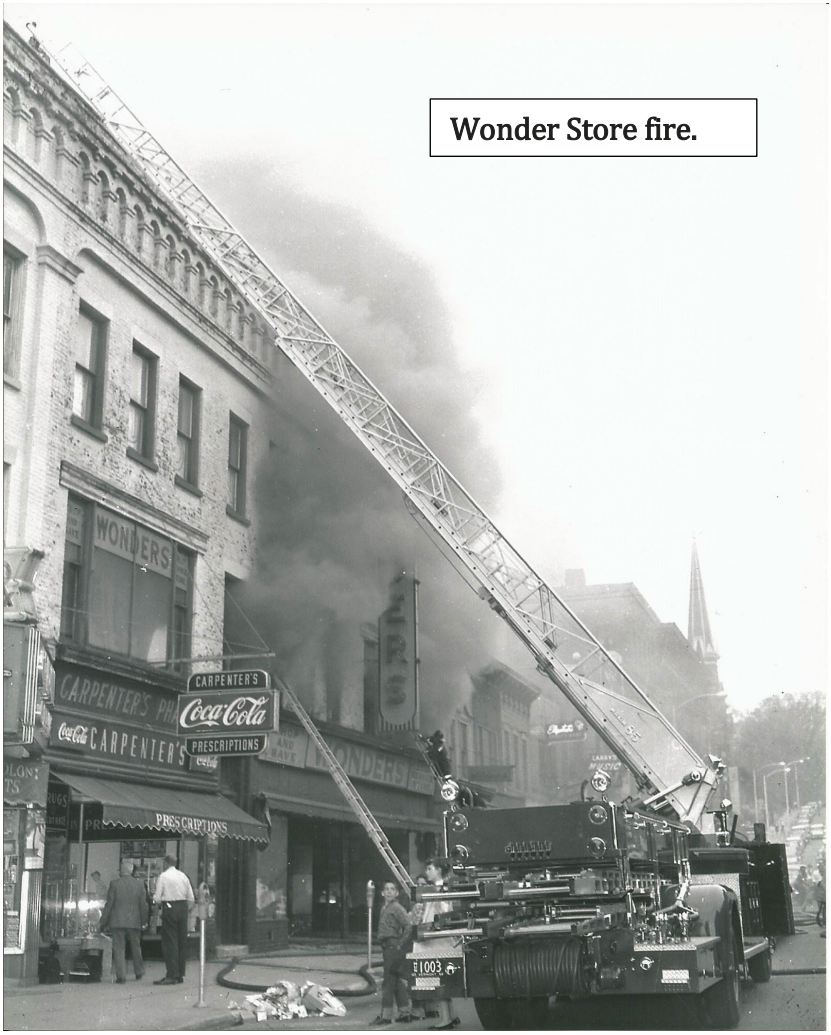


Ladder #1 that wiped out the casket truck in 1954

I remember watching the commotion from the IHM play yard when I was in first grade. Sr. Mary Imelda let us walk down to the sidewalk to watch the excitement! The old truck lasted three more years when it was replaced by a 1957 Maxim 85-foot truck with no tiller man needed!



Responding to an alarm in 1935.



Wonder Store fire.

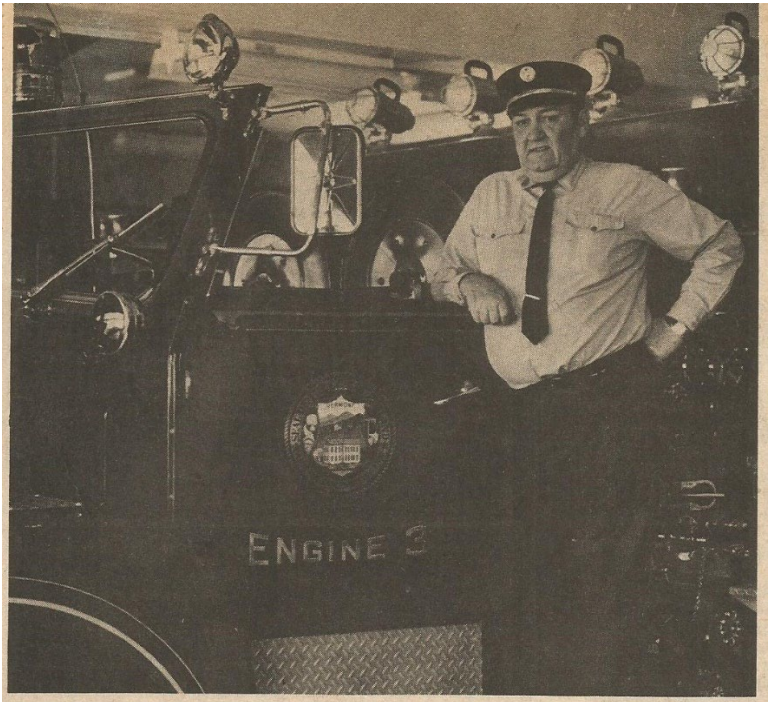
The old station held many memories for me as a child visiting, a youngster on his bicycle hanging around waiting for a fire call to chase the trucks, and as a firefighter. There was the smells; gasoline, oil, rubber, etc. You had to be there to know what I mean.

It was remodeled in 1901 after the City Hall fire and had not changed any since.

My first day on duty as a substitute fireman on May 23, 1966. I wore a UVM jersey and dungarees. Sub Bobby Picucci wore and MSJ shirt and Jay Gallipo had on what looked like a colorful Hawaiian shirt. Captain Marty Kelly, after reading roll call, came over and said, "One at a time, I want each of you to go out and buy a chambray shirt to look like you are in a semblance of a uniform before the Chief gets here and reads the Riot Act!" So much for starting out on the wrong foot! Obviously, we didn't get the memo!

Group photo. 1963. I worked with all but two of these men.

By then, the trucks had gotten bigger and space was cramped. Hence, after trying for twenty years, Chief Koltonski finally got his wish for a new fire station in 1968 when Rutland voters approved the bond issue. The new station was completed in November 1969, and on November 10, on my day off, I went down to ride out of Station 1 on Engine 3 for the last time.



Second Assistant Chief James P. Barron, retiring after 32 years service with the Rutland Fire Department, said he regretted having to go only about a year after the new fire station "with all its comforts and new equipment" opened. (Herald Photo—Storm)

Jim Barron when he retired in December 1970

Captain Jim Barron, the office in charge, and a member since 1940, stood up in the front of the truck and look around for one last time, and with a tear in his eye, hollered, "Wagons Ho!" and off we were to the new station on Center Street, leaving over 100 years of fire station history behind.

Right here I have to say that I hated the new station and never got used to it, even after 35 years. It had no atmosphere. No smells like downtown. It was a big garage, yes. It was modern, clean, spacious, and all of that, but I missed downtown. My big mistake was telling Chief Koltonski. He said he knew how I felt but this was progress, and if I didn't like it I could go back downtown and stay there alone! Needless to say, I "adjusted", at least outwardly, but not in spirit. Also, at the new station, we were not allowed to sit out front. Only on the North Main Street side which we adjusted to over time and really enjoyed.

Grass fire season sometimes started in March and lasted into May. Most of these fires were started by children playing with matches near dry grass in vacant lots. Heck, lets be honest, they were setting them to see the fire truck come and watch the excitement. Not that they were responsible for all of them. People burning trash or leaves and sometimes trying to burn off dry grass that got out of control were also culprits. Over the years as many as thirty grass fires might occur on a hot dry spring day.

Chief Alfred Koltonski and Miss USA, Carleen King Johnson, in August 1955. It was her day to be honored by Rutland and she was made "Honorary Fire Chief."

Chief Koltonski would always issue a “stern warning” in the Rutland Herald about kids and matches, but all that did was give them ideas. I enjoyed fighting grass fires with pack pumps when I was younger. As I aged, I was glad to see the light bladder packs appear. They both carried five gallons of water, but those old metal pack pumps got heavier over the years! But when I was young, racing all over Rutland on old Engine #4 (the grass fire truck”) was great! Not too many years earlier, I had been chasing it on my bicycle with Jack Venne or Chuck Chapleau!

Art Olson was a fireman for forty years retiring as Assistant Chief. He had a dry sense of humor and always reminded me of Bela Lugosi in looks. One day out on the roof, he got going with me about Rutland history.

He said before too long there would be a monument erected at Center and Merchants Row with statues of the four most prominent Rutlanders. There would be Herman Vaughn, Julia Dorr Ripley, Theodore Keiffer, and Charlie Mott, looking north, south, east, and west. Then as I stared in astonishment he, gave me his dry laugh! Needless to say, while well-known, Theodore and Charlie were far from "prominent."

Jim Rice was a fireman for forty years and reminded me of a Neanderthal. Really. He was one rugged man with long arms, built like a bull, and walked kind of bent forward. He attended Norwich University for one semester and played football there.

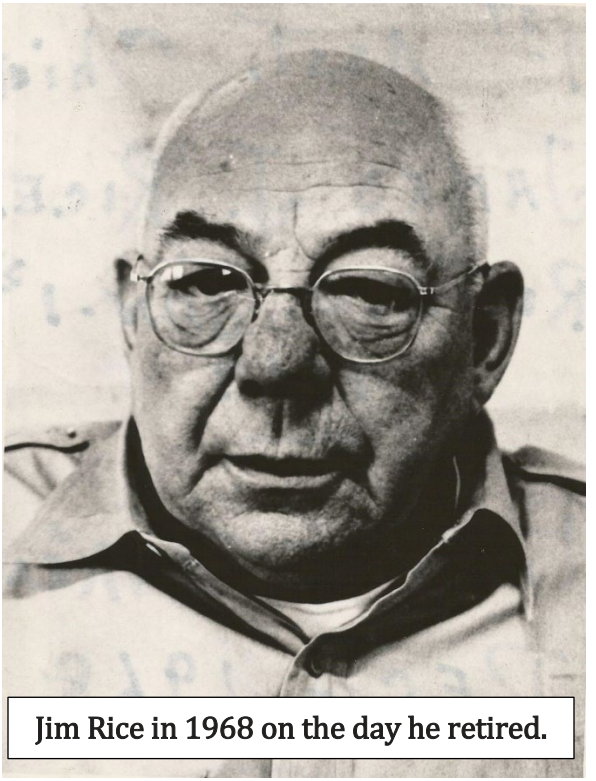
Jim went to school in Rutland with my uncle Tom O'Rourke. In 1966, when Rutland hosted the State Fire Convention, my uncle was in town from New Jersey with his family. He attended the parade and came down to the fire station after. When he saw Chief Rice, he hollered, "Junk Rice!" I almost passed out but that was his high school nickname. They had not seen each other for years and had a great reunion.

Jim Rice was the officer in charge at a fire in Chippenhook in 1950 when Engine 4 responded with him and four men to the George Jenks farm. The house was destroyed, and Mr. Jenks felt the firemen had not done a good job and aroused a crowd of neighbors to threaten to attack the firemen. They had to defend themselves with axes as they stood atop the truck. Mr. Jenks then made the mistake of punching Jim Rice and the rest was history. Luckily, that caused the crowd to back down, but Mr. Jenks was charged with assault and battery after he was released from the hospital!

And two other legendary Jim Rice stories: At a fire when a group of firemen were in a cellar, Jim hollered down, "How many of you are down there?"

"Seven, Chief." "Well, half of you come up and the other half stay down there!"

And then there was the time that one of the firemen decided to cook a special chicken dinner using some cooking wine. After a while Chief Rice went into the kitchen, grabbed the bottle and said, "The chicken's had enough wine and so have you!"



Jim Rice in 1968 on the day he retired.

Station 2 was affectionately known as "the retirement home." My first summer I spent a month there, two weeks with Fred Savage, and two weeks with Gerald Moore. Now, Fred was 67 and nearing retirement. In those days you worked until 70, believe it or not.

Fred would nap in the afternoon leaving me to watch TV or sit outside which I enjoyed talking with neighbors and passerby. Gerald Moore was younger and taught me how to drive and pump with the 1946 Buffalo. He also loved to play gin and card games were held nightly with Dr. Charles Beale, George Muller, Charlie Spoon, Sr., and once in a while Mickey McKirryher would show up. I was allowed to join in if someone was absent.

Station 2 had an odd running sheet. It answered all downtown box alarms as well as schools and other institution like the hospital, but it had boundaries which was Court Street, Pleasant Street, and South Main Street, and nothing west of Lincoln Avenue, If the emergency phone rang, your job was to wait a second until downtown answered then pick it up and listen. When the address was given, the downtown man would say: "Did you get that Station 2?" You would answer and determine if it was your call. So, one day with Tom Lynch, I picked the phone up too quickly.

Tom Lynch (Station #2) when he retired in December 1971 and Art Myhre

We later found out that it did not ring downtown. Anyways, I waited and could hear heavy breathing. I said, "Fire Department" and the voice hollered that his car was on fire in the garage on Park Street. I said OK and hung up. I was running for my gear and told Tom the address, and he said, "Not our territory." I told him that we were the only ones that knew of the fire and he said I had to call downtown. I called on the emergency phone and when Pat Hurley answered, I gave him the information. The first thing he said was "Is this you, Moons?" and "How do you know?" At this point I was pulling my hair out! But anyways downtown responded and extinguished the blaze! True story!

When the emergency phone sounded downtown, it rang a Claxton that you could hear all over the building. It also rang a buzzer upstairs and the men would run to the pole where they could listen in on the call through an intercom. Sometimes it was a wrong number. If it was a "go", the gong would be struck by the desk-man, but you would not believe some of the calls.

A lady called one day and gave her address. Bernie Kelley asked if the house was on fire, and her answer was, "No, just the kitchen." That turned in a General Alarm blaze.

There was a lady who wanted a small truck because she had a small fire!

Then there were those who wanted no sirens, so the neighbors would not know there was a problem!

There was also the Italian lady who excitedly hollered: "Big lotta fire down the street" and hung up. As the rest of the calls started coming in, we found out it was the G.H. Grimm on Pine Street!

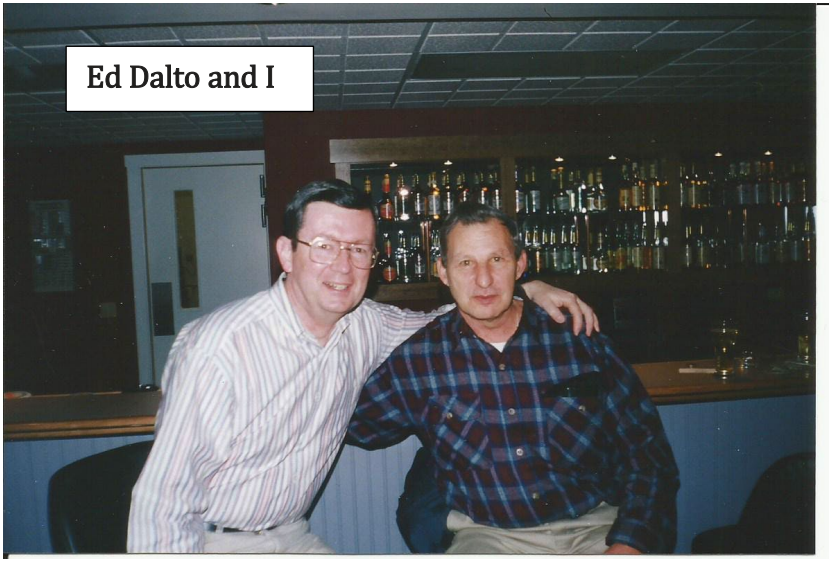
Most members did not like being the "Stay in Man." Each day a different man was assigned to take the desk when there was an alarm and not respond to the call. When the Wheeler Williams burned in 1948, whoever was on desk was one of those guys. So as a joke one of the fellows on the scene dialed the fire station from the restaurant and said, "Listen to those flames." Of course, at that point, the fire was out.

Ira Earle joined the department in October 1967 and had transmitted two General Alarms in six months and swore if it happened on more time, he was quitting! So, in June 1967, when the GE plant burned, and Marty Kelly called for a General Alarm, I had visions of Ira marching out the door! Needless to say, he did not, and a funny story about that call. The new GE phone, which had a normal ring, had been installed for only a week when it rang. It was J. Walter Herlihy reporting the fire in the office ceiling. Thirty-year veteran, George Ferguson, got so excited that he left the desk without hitting the bell and jumped in the ladder truck hollering "GE. GE," as he started the engine. Most of the shift was sitting out front and couldn't figure out how "Fergy" knew of the alarm as we rushed in.

149 Granger Street. Christmas Day, 1979. Myself (looking at camera), Asst. Chief Art Myhre and Chief Richard Barron talking with occupant.

My first call came in on the business phone as a lady at 21 Seabury Street reported her roast was on fire in the oven. There were four or five guys hanging around the desk and I hollered the address and we all jumped on Engine 3 and roared out the door. Trouble was, I had forgotten to hit the bell, but Dick Lovett, who was the stay-in man, ran over and hit it alerting the Engine #1 crew who were upstairs and wondering where we were going! Live and Learn. I didn't do that again!

The hose tower was 67 feet high with a wooden ladder that went up the wall to a wooden platform where there was a steel ring that hose hangers hung from to dry the wet hose. I had no fear of heights, but I had an issue getting onto that platform. I would climb up and down the ladder attached to the wall with no problem. One day Jim Barron caught me and asked what I was doing. When I told him, he started in on me about being afraid of ghosts in the hose tower! Of course, he had to go upstairs and tell the rest of the guys. Eddie Dalto came down and pointed his finger at me and said, "Climb." He was right behind me, so I was forced to make the transition onto the platform, and once I did it, all was well. I never could figure out what the issue was, but I got to put my name on a brick with a nail as did all the firemen who climbed the tower to the platform. Eddie Dalto became my mentor and friend and took me under his wing passing on much firefighting knowledge and experience. For that, I was forever grateful.



Assistant Chief Ralph Bean (always referred to by his nickname, “Cap Bean”), besides being a famous fly fisherman using his own handmade flies that he assembled at the station, was well-remembered for his accent which almost sounded southern. He was a dapper gentleman who always wore what I call a string tie. His most famous reason to be included here is a famous comment he made arriving on a fire scene. The fire was in the kitchen and the lady of the house was out front screaming at him as he got off Engine 3 where the officer rode. He looked at her and said years before Billy Joel: “Lady, we didn’t start this fire, we are just here to put it out!”

At the St. Peter’s barn fire in 1949 among all the smoke, Cap Bean saw a nun whom he yelled at to get out. When she wouldn’t leave, he grabbed Pat Mangan saying, “Pat, you’re a Catholic. Get that woman out of here.” At which time Pat said, “Gee, Chief, that’s a statue of the Blessed Mother!”

Ralph "Cap" Bean on Center Street looking dapper with his string tie.

And there was the night when Chief Bean answered the phone for a fire at The Palms Restaurant. With his accent, he yelled out: “The Parms.” Charlie Taylor was a new man and was on desk duty for that day and came down the pole and announced over the loudspeaker: “The Parms” , at which time grown men were brought to their knees as they knew what Bean’s accent meant.

But the most famous Ralph Bean comment was: “I have never seen a cat’s skeleton in a tree.”

Bobby Picucci was well-remembered for asking Jim Barron what those “big black suckers” on the side of the truck were for. You had to know Jim. As he came down from hitting the ceiling like Mr. Dithers in “Blondie” he hollered: “Those are hard suction hoses!”

There was a detail where Bob Picucci and Jay Gallipo were both sent on to help a prominent Jewish lady with an issue at her house. When she opened the door, they introduced themselves and she said, “Oh how nice, a couple of Irish boys!” That really got a laugh.

A cardinal rule we were told of was absolutely no talking about politics or religion. I always thought that was odd because out of thirty men, twenty-four were Catholic, the Chief was Episcopalian, and the other five were protestant, but those rules were respected and obeyed.

the Rutland Railway Freight House fire in April 1963. Left to right: Jim Rice, "Bunk" Seward, Eddie Dalto and Gerald Moore. Dick Lovett to the rear.

And a last memory of the more modern era concerns the first Super Bowl in 1967. The entire First Shift consisting mostly of die-hard football fans were lined up in front of the television in the Recreation Room when the emergency phone rang. There was a refrigerator leaking gas at the original Vincent's Restaurant at 86 Woodstock Avenue, now the location of Irving's. Captain Art Olson dispatched the three youngest members, Ray Gallipo, Jiggy Lloyd, and myself, in the old Rescue truck. Upon arrival, everyone had vacated the restaurant and Vincent Chiriaco was outside telling us that the culprit was in the kitchen. We put on our Scott Air Packs and went in where we encountered two refrigerators. In the rush to get back to the game, we muckled onto the closest one and carried it outside only to discover, you guessed it, it was the wrong one. So, we carried it back in and finally brought the leaking one out.

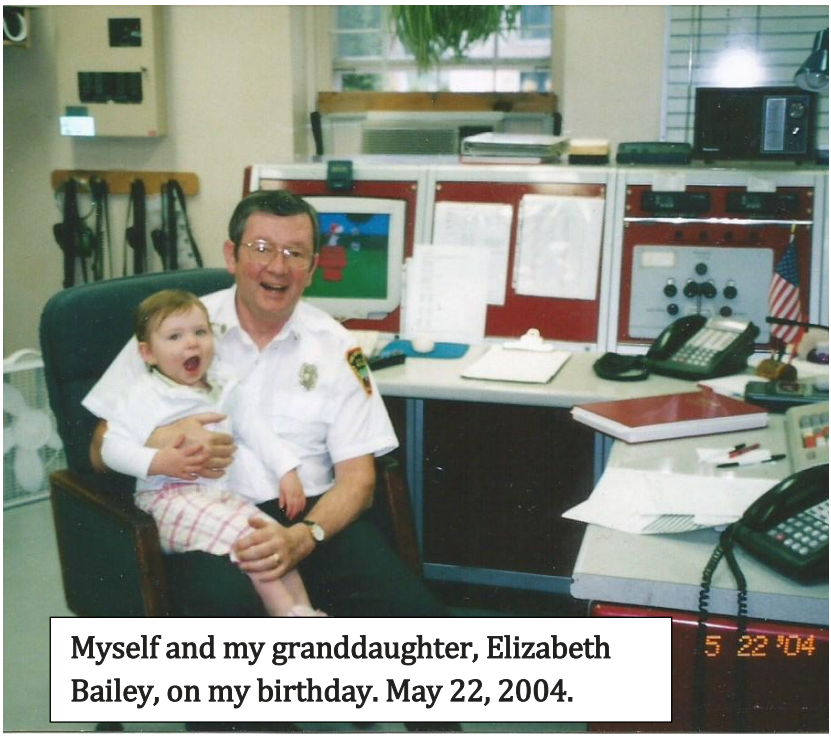
We used a smoke ejector to vent he remaining odor and returned to the station where the game was almost at half time. No big shows then, but poor Ray Gallipo suddenly realized that he was suffering some ill effects from the gas. Wherever he had hair, there was a burning rash. Neither Jiggy nor I were so affected. Poor Ray had to go to the RRMC for medical attention. By the time he returned, still in great discomfort, the first Super Bowl had ended!

40 Elm Street. Christmas Dav.

Group photo. 1974. I am in the rear. There are nine of us left.

Hopefully, you have enjoyed my nostalgic trips back in time of City of Rutland Fire Department lore and memories. I have embellished none, and like I said, they are all true. I could relate dozens more, but I realize I have space restrictions. So, thanks to Barbara Giffin for coming up with this idea and thanks to you for reading them. I hope I brought a smile to your lips and relayed some fire department history.

Ray Mooney, over and out!



Myself and my granddaughter, Elizabeth Bailey, on my birthday. May 22, 2004.

The ***Quarterly*** is published by the Rutland Historical Society, 96 Center Street, Rutland, Vt 05701-4023. Copies are $2 each plus postage of $1 per order. Membership in the Society includes a subscription to the ***Quarterly*** and the ***Newsletter***. Copyright 2022 The Rutland Historical Society, Inc. ISBN 0748-2493.